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PAKISTAN'S USE OF FAKE NEWS ON INDO-CHINA STANDOFF: A NEW LOW

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US Veteran and author Jason Belcher notes, "When opinions, rumors, or lies are systematically presented as fact, fake news is created....The objective of fake news (which is the civilian version of information warfare with the same objectives) is to shape the attitudes, perception, and beliefs of the target audience."¹ The first causality in it is 'truth' which is deliberately concealed or tarnished in the pseudo environment created by the fake news makers, followed by short as well long term effect on the consumers (mass media masses) of the fake news, both in terms tweaking of perceptions and decisions based on misinformation generated. This is an emerging challenge to the legitimacy of journalism and is also endangering the very foundation of Internet, which was designed for free flow of knowledge.

Talking in the Indian context, recently, the Indo-China standoff in Doklam has been in the news media, both print as well online. However, in the midst of narratives and counter narratives from the Indian as well Chinese media, one very disturbing side of fake news was witnessed, which not only found its way to the social media, but was at one point in time blindly circulated by the users without verifying the story itself. On July 17, 2017, a Pakistan based media outlet, KhabarTVPK uploaded a news package on Youtube² with the headline, "*China rocket attack on Indian Army*" which was also posted on the website "<http://dunyanews.tv/en>", stating that, "*Chinese cross border rocket attack kills 158 Indian soldiers*".³



Image by KhabarTVPK claiming the Attack on Indian Army (Source Youtube)



Fake news snapshot

The creation and distribution of this fake news went viral and initiated series of narratives. Although, it is normal for Pakistani media to infuse hatred in the minds of people, with war mongering narratives perpetually distorting the principles of journalism but, the time and positioning of the news package in the social media needs special attention for five major reasons. Firstly, it is evident that the creator of malicious content wanted to exploit the crisis situation and generate/disseminate content

to further infuse tension in the existing situation. Secondly, it reinforced the inability of certain sections of Pakistani media to play any constructive role in peace building in the region. Thirdly, the news package reflected complete disregard for journalistic ethics. Fourthly, it also exhibited how certain sections of Pakistani media wish to destabilize the region. Lastly, it also indicated an attempt to divert attention from Pakistan PM Sharif's involvement in Panama papers or fake documents produced by Sharif to evade tax, which is 'real news'. Using tactic of fake news, this section is trying to push important issues into oblivion. This puts the question mark on their existence as newsmakers and their loyalty towards their journalism, which should ideally stand on the foundation of public good.

These fake new items are just the beginning of information warfare in the era of post-truth age. A few preventive measures that one can take to handle this epidemic of fake news can be suggested. Firstly, to exercise caution when exposed to suspicious and doubtful content on social media and pause before hitting that share button/icon. Secondly, to verify the suspicious content by putting the malicious content in the search engines (Google, Firefox, Safari etc.) to find out if the news is real or fake. Thirdly, to map the path of the suspicious news content and trace its origin. In the aforementioned example, the news was shared on a popular social media networking site, and on tracking it further, it was found it was posted on a website and on YouTube from which others are blindly picking it up and following like a digital herd. If many unverified websites are carrying the same news item, it doesn't guarantee the authenticity of the news contents, until an authentic website backs up its claim. Fourthly, to exercise patience and avoid temptation of sharing unconfirmed news reports in your own social media groups without verifying it or to prove a point, because then knowingly or unknowingly you are yourself backing fake news. The eagerness to 'share it first' should be replaced by 'verify it first.'

To conclude, the emergence of digital age has opened doors to many opportunities, but it has also brought many challenges. The epidemic of fake news is one such grave concern, which if not checked can prove detrimental to the fourth pillar of the democracy and can also put freedom of expression in jeopardy. The founders of Internet envisioned cyber space to be a place where knowledge and information could freely flow. Nevertheless, shadow always accompanies the light. Careful use of the medium is certainly called for in today's times.

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(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Belcher, Jason. 2017. Fake News: The Fall Of Critical Thinking And The Rise Of Selfie Propaganda. Ebook. Kindle.

² *China rocket attack on Indian Army. (2017). YouTube. Retrieved 17 July 2017, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8n2a2b2calo>*

³ *"Chinese Cross Border Rocket Attack Kills 158 Indian Soldiers - World - Dunya News". 2017. Dunyanews.Tv. Accessed July 17 2017. <http://dunyanews.tv/en/World/397393-Chinese-cross-border-rocket-attack-kills-158-India>.*

